

# Sustaining NGOs with IECTs

# LearnLink



*CEPAR headquarters and staff in  
Quito, Ecuador*

## BACKGROUND

Ecuador is characterized by a mix of cultures and recent urban migration. Among its 12 million people-- 55 percent mestizo and 25 percent indigenous-- most live equally divided between the highlands and coastal areas. Half the population now lives in urban areas, with few living in the rainforest. Quito, the political capital, is a cosmopolitan city with a small town geniality. It is also rich in history and culture, and the

cityscape is dotted with cathedrals and museums of Baroque and religious art. The country's diversity is reflected not only in its culture but also in its geography. Though land area is small, Ecuador has one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world.

Despite its rich culture and geography, Ecuador is also a land of widespread poverty. Continued poor economic performance over several decades has exacerbated the situation and limited growth in social development. Recently, Ecuador has gone through dramatic

macroeconomic crises, subsequent political crises, and, concomitantly, a cultural "loss of hope."

USAID, a long-term, major donor in the country, has played a seminal role in promoting social development through support for microenterprise activities and critical policy and legislative reforms pertaining to health and family planning. Recently, however, USAID has begun phasing out its work in these sectors and will focus its support instead on the environment, judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, and the recent Ecuador-Peru peace accord.



## THE CENTER FOR POPULATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (CEPAR)



CEPAR Logo

Since its inception in 1978, this Ecuadorian NGO has promoted informed policy dialogue on population, health, and social development matters.

It has accomplished this

aim by conducting field and analytic demographic research and by engaging in information, education, and communication (IEC) activities, particularly for health and population authorities and social leaders.

Over the past 20 years, CEPAR has conducted 25 surveys, three national demographic studies, and 130 case studies on topics in health, population, communication, and social policy. It has hosted nearly 1,000 professional development and networking events for over 90,000 participants, ranging from symposiums, panels, and round table discussions to specialized courses, workshops, and high profile conferences. Among its information resources are several Ecuadorian demographic databases, most notably SICEPAR, as well as a specialized documentation center and a press clippings archive. The technologically advanced Informatics unit has pioneered

## Zoom in on Ecuador

### Geography

**Location:** Western South America, between Peru and Colombia

**Area:** 283,560 sq km

**Environmental issues:** frequent earthquakes, landslides, volcanic activity; periodic droughts; deforestation; soil erosion; desertification; pollution

### People

**Population:** 12,562,496

**Age:** 35% <14; 60% aged 15-64; 5% >65 years

**Population growth rate:** 1.78%

**Infant mortality rate:** 30.69 deaths/1,000 live births

**Life expectancy at birth:** total: 72.16 years; males: 69.54 years; females: 74.9 years

**Total fertility rate:** 2.63 children born/woman

**Ethnic groups:** Mestizo (mixed Amerindian and Spanish) 55%, Amerindian 25%, Spanish 10%, Black 10%

**Religions:** 95% Roman Catholic

**Languages:** Spanish (official), Amerindian

**Net primary school enrollment:** 100%

**Primary school survival ratios in 5th grade:** 88%

**Secondary school enrollment:** 51%

**Literacy:** 90.1%; males: 92%; females: 88.2%

### Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$4,800

**Inflation rate:** 43%

**Unemployment rate:** 12%

**External debt:** \$12.5 billion

### Communications

**Telephones:** 586,300

**Radio broadcast stations:** AM 272, shortwave 39

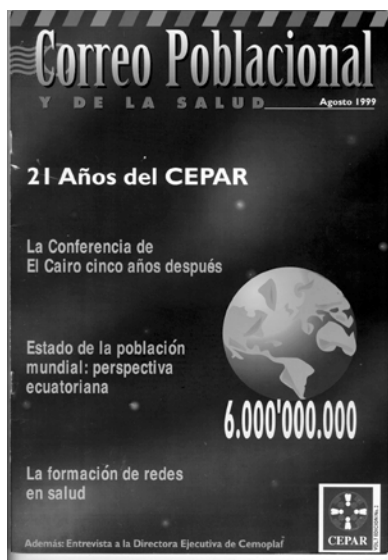
**Television broadcast stations:** 15

**Televisions:** 940,000

**Computers per 1000:** 18

**Internet hosts per 10,000:** 1.42

*The World Factbook 1999,*  
[www.odci.gov/cia/publication/factbook/index.htm](http://www.odci.gov/cia/publication/factbook/index.htm),  
[www.unescostat.unesco.org/en/stats/stats0.htm](http://www.unescostat.unesco.org/en/stats/stats0.htm), and  
[www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/countrydata.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/countrydata.htm).



*CEPAR's quarterly online magazine*

massive data entry, processing, and statistical analyses, and its Communications department publishes a quarterly magazine and newsletters and offers advice on developing communication plans and training materials. Through its different units and cadres of professionals, CEPAR has collaborated with and provided services to the Ecuadorean Ministry of Health and other public institutions, international and regional groups, and academic, research, and civil society organizations.

CEPAR's continued and influential work has been recognized both nationally and internationally. In 1991, CEPAR received the Worldwide Population Prize from the United Nations. Ecuadorean authorities also have honored CEPAR for its contributions to research and analysis of health and population policies.

Throughout much of its history, USAID has supported CEPAR's work.

## **SUSTAINABILITY IN THE FACE OF A FUNDING PHASE-OUT**

Unfortunately, USAID is phasing out its support for CEPAR along with other health, family planning, and microenterprise activities. To help promote CEPAR's sustainability in light of the phase out, USAID engaged LearnLink to develop the organization's full potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The USAID Task Order for a CEPAR/LearnLink collaboration came at a time when the organization was starting to redefine its vision and mission and developing strategic plans that addressed crucial sustainability issues.

In general, LearnLink's task was to help CEPAR assume an exemplary role in using ICTs to:

- Improve organizational efficiency;
- Help catalyze the sustainability process;
- Improve networking with similar-minded NGOs and institutions; and
- Expand educational and advocacy outreach.

The Task Order objectives included assisting in the creation of a CEPAR web site and designing an online version of CEPAR's "Correo" magazine. Since

CEPAR's information technology staff were already partially trained, the specific aims were to expand the organization's electronic information options and services, enhance its' electronic networking capabilities and services among health and population-related Ecuadorian NGOs and institutions, and develop a similar networking capacity within the Andean region.

The overriding concern was for CEPAR's long-term relevance and sustainability. Thus, the Task Order was not so much about creating and sustaining a web site CEPAR could call its own or about developing Internet and networking capabilities within the organization and its partners. It was really about developing new organizational skills.

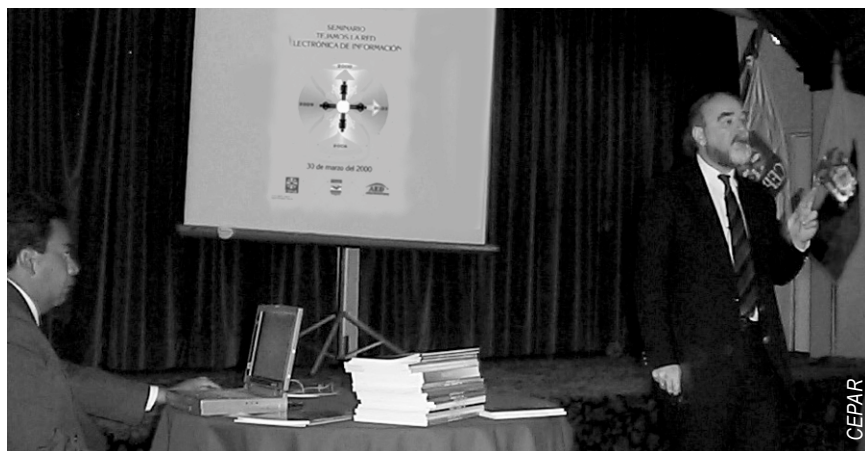
From past work, CEPAR was well supplied with computers and software applications. It had not ventured into the communicative aspects of ICTs, however, nor taken a

proactive role due to organizational and contextual limitations. While CEPAR did have IEC components and functions-- crucial prerequisites for a meaningful transition towards the full use of modern technology-- it was not easy to make the transition from IT to ICT and to shift from classic IEC projects and activities to new technological supports.

## CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES

### Achieving a long-term vision

The strategy and scope of activities that LearnLink developed and implemented, with significant CEPAR participation, set an ambitious, long-term navigational chart. Expert technical assistance was sequenced to meet and supplement CEPAR's needs, wants, and timing. With the onsite help of LearnLink's collaborative partner, the Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE at



*Training with CEPAR's web developer Eduardo Arguello and LearnLink's Eduardo Contreras-Budge*

www.incre.org), advisors first addressed CEPAR's human, organizational, and technical needs. CEPAR's internal perception that short-term activities were strictly computer-associated, however, limited the impact of the technical assistance. At the same time, the overall health of the country, due to its most severe economic and political crisis of the century, further challenged the efficacy of planning for a long-term ICT strategy.

The technical assessment of short- and long-term ICT options provided the criteria for the acquisition, installation, and stable operation of more efficient hardware and software to supplement and improve existing computer capacity. The telecommunications and Internet connectivity aspects were the most salient and visible improvements in CEPAR's capabilities.



*CEPAR's Director Dr. Nelson Oviedo*

Initially, CEPAR conducted its own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. LearnLink supplemented it with a participatory SWOT and staff survey that focused on CEPAR's communication capabilities and flows. While these assessments were instructive about needs and wants, the organization's adoption of ICTs for sustainability was slow. This is not surprising in an environment where ICTs for development are not the primary focus and where communication connections are poor. In the end, some survival strategies compatible with ICTs were adopted, but they did not correspond to the Task Order timeline, and CEPAR found itself facing national crises, the imminent end of USAID's support, and the loss of its Communication and Informatics departments' heads and their specific technical leadership.

## Outcomes

The most lasting result of the Task Order was not the enhanced computer capacity but the hands-on training and visioning imparted by INCRE and LearnLink experts. CEPAR now has a sensitized, trained cadre of professionals as well as connectivity resources to provide reliable, quality information on topics of population, health, and social development in Ecuador. CEPAR is positioned to encourage dialogue and consensus and to affect change in social policy.

The CEPAR information technology staff was trained and easily became proficient on all connectivity and network management operations. Training included the use of a variety of software programs, routine operation and communication via email, web searches on the Internet, and production of web-suitable materials. Moreover, CEPAR extended the training to its partner organizations that lacked electronic facilities, an action that moved CEPAR in the direction of more meaningful networking.

One of the most significant outcomes of the intervention occurred in the process of developing the web site. By design, web site development involved a careful, step-by-step exercise that had most of CEPAR's staff working side-by-side with INCRE professionals. First, input was generated for the design, focus, and content of the site via in-depth consultations with all CEPAR content providers, regardless of their roles as trainers, communicators, or population researchers. Subsequently, the technical staff from CEPAR worked laboriously to accomplish all of the "nitty-gritty" details that get a web site up and running. This process started from a point of no expertise and led to a fully operable web site that was produced by a team of CEPAR staff members. Not only did the staff accomplish this on their own, but they also produced, with no further help, the first-ever CD-ROM in CEPAR's 20-year

history and advised other smaller NGOs on ICT uses. It is noteworthy that the CEPAR web site proudly displays the country seal with the legend "Made in Ecuador" on its home page.



While the web site was being developed and staff were being trained, LearnLink continued to help CEPAR understand and act upon immediate avenues for increasing organizational strengthening with ICTs. CEPAR was provided with appropriate case studies and action-filled illustrations from similar NGOs in Latin America, the United States, and elsewhere in the world.

## FINAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The CEPAR web site ([www.cepar.org](http://www.cepar.org)) is up and running. As with all web sites, it is in need of updates, revisions, and a strategic location for links to other sites that are important information sources and networking contacts. The "Correo" quarterly magazine is now published online, and the paper publication was discontinued because its distribution was unsustainable. Additionally, other NGOs have benefited from CEPAR's expertise in web site design, CD-ROM production, and E-communication, and it is hoped that web site links to other organizations will be added so that readers can benefit from other partners' input.



IEC is now advancing through both online and CD-ROM access to CEPAR demographic and health research results, analyses, and regular emails of its weekly bulletins and alerts to a growing, but still restricted, list of subscribers worldwide. Unfortunately, there is a hiatus in organizational networking among similar institutions while the country responds to its recent economic and political crises. For example, there are currently weak electronic links to the CEPAR-pioneered NGOs' Health Network in Pichincha



*Alicia Ruiz, CEPAR's head of Informatics*

province and none yet to other networks in which CEPAR is active.

## REMAINING CHALLENGES

To achieve a new identity and strategic repositioning, CEPAR still needs its web site to evolve from an initial organizational prototype to a friendly and inviting home for similar-minded organizations in Ecuador that lack ICT resources and access. CEPAR's vast, archival research resources also need to be available online and/or in electronic formats, such as CD-ROM, and there is considerable work ahead in digitizing the rich collections of materials that the organization has produced over the past 20 years. Additionally, in the future, CEPAR needs to increase the quantity and quality of email-based products and to move toward more sophisticated offerings, such as discussion lists, online events, and even some manageable distance training opportunities.

CEPAR has had a tradition of facilitating key real-life networks. It now needs to aggressively expand electronic networks topically, geographically, and socio-culturally and bring other reluctant and technologically hesitant partners into the ICT realm of networking.